

Taíno Influence on Jamaican Folk traditions

By Lesley-Gail Atkinson

Who are the Taínos?

The earliest inhabitants of Jamaica were the Taínos, who settled the island about 650 AD. They populated the Greater Antilles, the Bahamian archipelago, and possibly the northern Lesser Antilles. Over the years, the Taínos have been mistaken as the Arawak of South America, however like the Kalinago (formerly Carib) they spoke an Arawakan language. The indigenous population once numbered in the thousands, with dense villages across Jamaica. The Taínos were the first people in the New World to meet the Spaniards, and this unfortunately led to their rapid demise. Today, some Jamaicans view the Taínos as just symbols on our Coat of Arms, or consider their legacy as limited to bammy and hammocks. The Taínos, however have innovated, contributed, and influenced, so many things we take for granted such as the thatch roof, and the pitch style roof built to withstand hurricanes. Other technological innovations include canoes, fishing techniques, mound farming (predecessor to the cassava and yam hills), cassava processing, food coloring and preservatives.

The main objective of Taíno Day (May 5, 2010) is to increase awareness of the first Jamaicans and their rich culture. The focus this year is highlighting Taíno influence on Jamaican folk traditions. Folk traditions are not limited to accepted beliefs and stories. It encompasses the things that people believe (elements of worldview, practices), do (dance, music, rituals), know (technological skills, food processing, medicine), make (art, craft, architecture), and say (proverbs, legends, stories). This article, however, will just look at Taíno place names, attitudes to indigenous material culture, and their contributions to folk beliefs, medicine, musical instruments and legends.

What's in a Name?

Your name or what you choose to be called is an important part of your identity, thus one of the Taíno legacies is their role in the naming of the island. We have been taught that *Xaymaca* was the Taíno name given to the island, meaning “land abounding with springs”, which later evolved into *Jamaica* – land of wood and water. In Columbus’ journal the island is however referred to as *Yamaye*. B.W. Higman and B.J. Hudson have suggested that “the *ca* in *Jamaica* is a locative suffix typical of Amerindian languages, thus *Jamaica* meant the place or location where the *Jamai* or *Yamaye* people lived” (2009, p. 24).

Today, *Liguanea*, a derivation of *Iguana*, and *Guanaboa* (Vale), the Taíno word for soursop are known indigenous place names. The Taíno have indirectly influenced other place names such as Arawak Cave at Rio Bueno, Trelawny and *Cacique*’s Ridge, Retreat, St. Ann. The term “Indian”, whether denoting Amerindian or East Indian is a feature in our language and traditions. Those reflecting our Taíno heritage include Indian Cony (Coney), Indian God-tree (Silk Cotton Tree) and Indian Yam (Yampi). In Westmoreland, there are three caves with the nickname of Indian Head Cave or Indian Hole Cave. The Drummond Cave, New Mountain Cave and Westcliffe Cave apparently got this name due to the presence of Taíno burials and/or rock art such as petroglyph (rock carvings) and/or pictographs (rock paintings). The name Image Cave has also

been associated with caves where Taíno wooden artefacts or rock art have been discovered, such as in the Carpenter's Mountain, Manchester (1792) and Aboukir, St. Ann (1992)

Caves, Duppies, Shrines and the Afterlife

Many Jamaicans have a deep-seated fear of caves. The darkness, and journeying into the unknown, has led to the global perception of them as portals to the underworld. From the dawning of prehistory man has used supernatural elements to explain the mysteries of the cave. For the Taíno, caves were places of dwelling, burials, and repositories but most importantly they had mythological and religious connotations. The Taíno believed that mankind originated from caves. In their creation story, the first people continued to live in caves, and each night someone was to stand watch at the cave entrance. This task was given to a man named Mácocael, who one day was late returning to his duties and as such the Sun carried him off for his lack of vigilance. The people closed the entrance against him and he was turned to stone near the entrance of the cave (Pané, 1999, pp. 5-6).

This belief is reflective in Taíno reverence for caves and the location of rock art at the entrance of the caves may have been in reference to the creation story. Patrick Browne (1756) recorded the fear that the enslaved Africans had towards caves, particularly those with Taíno rock art and burials. This seems to have transcended in time as today you can find similar attitudes towards Taíno material culture, which are believed to be associated with obeah. An example is the Aboukir *zemís* that were first discovered in the 1940s, returned to the cave and then rediscovered in 1972 and kept for twenty years before being acquired by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (Saunders & Gray, 2006, p. 188).

At Chancery Hall, St. Andrew, the skull from a Taíno burial was crushed due to the fear of the working of obeah.

“One Bubby Susan”, a Taíno petroglyph (rock carving) at Rock Spring, St. Mary provides an interesting example of how Taíno material culture has been woven into Jamaican folklore. “One Bubby Susan” is one of our oldest known rock art sites. It was recorded in 1820, and is also known as Dryland, Image Cave, and Man Cave. The petroglyph is called “One Bubby Susan”, as she has only one breast. This is derived from the lore of Long/Lang Bubby Susan, who is regarded as a duppy that terrorizes children, also identifiable as the “Old Hige/Hag”.

According to Martha Warren Beckwith, Long Bubby Susan is characterized by breasts which touch the ground and which she throws over her shoulders when attacked (1929, p. 99). Erna Brodber has even written a short story on One Bubby Susan (Brodber, 1989, pp. 52-53). This rock art site is also special to Akan, Yoruba and Dagara priests and priestess who treat the image and the cave as a shrine (Erna Brodber, personal communication, 2010). This veneration for indigenous rock art sites is not unique to Jamaica, as in Haiti, these sites are perceived as a source of healing, and incorporated into pilgrimages that take place in the summer (Beauvoir-Dominique, 2009, pp. 85-86). While in Puerto Rico, the rock art site *Cueva Lucero* is used for local godparent ceremonies (Michele H. Hayward, personal communication, 2010).

Within the Taíno worldview, there existed two types of souls: *goeíza*, the soul of the living and *opía*, the soul of the dead. Their world was filled with spirits, both good and evil, and it is here we find parallels with Afro-Jamaican folk beliefs. The Silk Cotton Tree also known as the *Ceiba* or Indian God-Tree was believed to be the home of spirits for both Taíno and Afro-Jamaicans. The *Ceiba* can grow to a height of 40m and live up to 300 years and it is quite imposing within any landscape. It has many spiritual, mythical and medicinal qualities. **At times the tree appears to be smoking, which could be part of the mythical attributes associated with the tree. The god-tree produces large pods of seeds covered with silky floss that can be used to stuff pillows, however the Taíno did not utilize this fibre for fear that their sleep would be restless and haunted.** They however, used the bark and leaves of the *Ceiba* for its emetic, diuretic and antispasmodic properties. Amongst Afro-Jamaicans, the god-tree is associated with duppies, mischievous spirits that live in its roots and feed on “fig” leaves, and the “duppy pumpkin” (Beckwith, 1929, p. 89). It is believed that silk cotton trees should not be planted too close to the house, because the duppies will terrorize the people.

In the New World, indigenous peoples commonly believed that the souls of the dead took the form of animals and moved freely among the living in the night. The bat and the owl were very important symbols in Taíno mythology and death. To the Taíno, the bat represented the *opías*. Fruit-eating bats such as *Artibeus jamaicensis* love dining on guavas, which is also the favorite food of the Taíno spirits of the dead. Bats are also perceived as death images in the folklore. Another example is birds which are viewed “as spirit beings, the natural avatars of shamans, able to break the bonds of earth and fly up to the spirit realm” (Saunders, 2005, p. 31). Amongst Jamaican folk tradition, the owl symbolizes death, for instance “if an owl cries in the night near your house, it means death” (Barrett, 1976, p. 41). The Taíno had a similar belief as the owl was considered the divine bird of the *coyaba*, heaven or underworld. They were “terrified of the owl’s nocturnal call because they believed the bird was the herald of the lord of *coyaba* and it was delivering the message that a human life was about to end (Arrom 1988, pp. 23-24, cited in García Arévalo, 1997, p. 122).

The “Holy Tree”, Indian Savin Tree and other cure alls

The Taíno contribution to folk medicine should not be overlooked nor underestimated (Payne-Jackson & Alleyne, 2004, p. 126). A number of these medicinal plants were discovered and used by the Taíno. Authors such as Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1851-1855) and Henry Barham (1794) recorded Taíno uses of herbs which may have been incorporated in the enslaved African medical practices. The flower of the *Lignum vitae* is our national flower, but to the Taíno, *guayacan*, as they called it was “The Holy Tree”.

Trees on a whole were important as they believed that at night, trees received messages from the gods, and this is probably why many Taíno *zemís* are made from wood. *Guayacan* was magical and scared, not only as a source material for their religious paraphernalia, but due to its medicinal properties. A *lignum vitae* decoction was used by the Taíno as a remedy for *yaya* (syphilis), which was later adopted by Europeans. In Jamaican folk tradition it has been used to treat bruises and pain (Lowe, 1972, p. 22). Arrowroot was also employed by the indigenous people to draw out poisons from snakes, stings (Barham, 1794, p. 7 & 235) and poison arrows.

Arrowroot is said to be good for “building up the stomach” and diarrhea (Payne-Jackson & Alleyne, 2004, p. 154). The leaf of the cocoa or chocolate is used as an anti-inflammatory drug in folk medicine (Payne-Jackson & Alleyne, 2004). Among the Taíno, the cocoa was very important to the *behique*, medicine men. The juice of the cocoa plant was believed to have resuscitation powers even in death.

The Indian Savin Tree was used by the Taíno to treat and soothe wounds. When parts of the tree are bruised it produces a strong balsamic scent. Have you ever heard that soursop leaf tea will settle your nerves? The soursop leaf is good for the treatment of nervous conditions. The *guanaboa* (soursop) was a popular fruit of the Taíno, and can be used to treat high blood pressure, wounds and as an antidote for poison (Payne-Jackson & Alleyne, 2004, pp. 149, 158, 165). Guava seems to be the ultimate cure all, as it is said to be able to treat insect bites, ulcers, boils, colds, nausea, stomach ache, vomiting, haemorrhage, heart ailments and is also a good and tonic (Payne-Jackson & Alleyne, 2004, pp. 149-167)

Making a Joyful Noise

Folk musical instruments have been thought to reflect the African tradition; however some of these instruments were made and used by our indigenous ancestors. These include flutes made from hollow plants and trees such as wild cane and the trumpet tree. The Taíno also played seashell trumpets, particularly that of the Queen Conch. A feature in several Jamaican Church bands is the tambourine. To the Taíno, this was called the *maguey*, and it was made from the trumpet tree and covered with shells. This instrument, however, was only played by the *Cacique*, and was used during the sacred *areitos*, which celebrated the ancestors. *Maracas*, commonly known as rattles were used during the *cohoba* ritual, and medicinal ceremonies, but are now a popular instrument amongst children.

Mountain Pride and other legends

Jamaica has a rich oral tradition, which was inherited from our African ancestors. Oral tradition was also integral to the Taíno society, during their *areitos*, which consisted of music, dance and ritual; they performed songs retelling their histories, and the origins and myths of their gods (Rouse, 1992). In Jamaica the telling of legends and folktales are important elements of our folk culture. “Mountain Pride,” “Martha Brae”, “The Golden Table” and “Lover’s Leap” are popular legends. Three of these tales are associated with the Taíno and the Martha Brae legend was even incorporated into the plot of the LTM pantomime *Arawak Gold* (1992). In the interest of time, only the legend of Mountain Pride will be highlighted.

Mountain Pride was a beautiful Taíno girl, who was to wed her love the *Cacique*. A chief priest who wanted her for himself murdered her love on their wedding day. Mountain Pride refused to give herself to the chief priest, as such threw herself over a cliff falling to her death. Where she fell, there soon grew a beautiful tree with a crown of magenta blossoms, representing the crown of feathers that Mountain Pride once wore. The tree still grows near limestone cliffs in her memory.

Today as we celebrate Taíno Day, it is hoped that fellow Jamaicans will join the Jamaica

National Heritage Trust in honouring the first Jamaicans. Our history as a people began long before the arrival of the Europeans. We should not remember the Taíno as a lost culture, but as a people whose traditions we still embrace today in the 21st century.

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Captions1.

The Silk Cotton Tree also known as the Ceiba or Indian God-Tree was believed to be the home of spirits for both Taíno and Afro-Jamaicans. It is found at Paradise Park, Westmoreland. It is over 300 years old.

Captions2.

The Taino ceremonial staff found in Aboukir cave, St. Ann in 1992. Residents thought it was associated with obeah when first discovered.

Captions2.

"One Bubby Susan", a Taíno petroglyph (rock carving) at Rock Spring, St. Mary provides an interesting example of how Taíno material culture has been woven into Jamaican folklore.